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Israel and the Kurds: A Pragmatic Relationship in Middle Eastern Politics

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Introduction

Following independence in 1948, the state of Israel, then faced with adversaries on all its borders, eventually adopted a policy in the late 1950s of attempting to coordinate actions and strategy among pro-Western countries on the periphery of the Arab world, including the Republic of Turkey, Shah Muhammad Pahlavi's Iran and Emperor Haile Selassie's Ethiopia. In the words of Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, Israel's object was "not necessarily" to create a "formal and public alliance," but rather a group of states "which by mutual assistance and joint efforts, in political, economic and other fields, will be able to stand up steadfastly against Soviet expansion through [Egypt's Arab Nationalist President Gamal Abd al-] Nasser."[1] In 1958, when Ben-Gurion explained his plans to U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower in attempting to gain that country's support, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, who had fled to the Soviet Union from Iran following the demise of the Mahabad Republic in 1946, returned to Iraq at the invitation of the newly-established government of

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[1]Ben-Gurion to Eisenhower, July 24, 1958, Eisenhower Papers, International Series, Box 35, Mid-East, July 1958, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

General Abd al-Karim Qasim, which had overthrown the pro-Western Hashemite monarchy.

Three years later, Qasim had a falling out with Barzani as he had no intention of granting Kurdish autonomy; a military conflict ensued which lasted until 1970, two years after the Arab nationalist Baathists, who developed close ties with the Soviet Union, seized power in Iraq. In the meantime, by the mid-1960s, Israel came to the military assistance of the Kurds in Iraq, an arrangement which well suited both parties' respective interests. This connection was also part of the periphery strategy designed to deal with the Jewish state's hostile Arab neighbors; while Ben-Gurion emphasized the role of those aforementioned countries in the Middle East and Africa to the U.S., the Israelis also foresaw assistance from non-Arab minorities as was the case with the southern Sudanese *Anya Nya* rebels. However, Israel's support for Kurds in Iraq was a more sensitive operation as Turkey and Iran had a history of dealing forcefully against periodic manifestations of Kurdish nationalism in their respective countries. Nevertheless, the Shah's Iran was willing to cooperate with Israel against Iraq, with whom it had a border dispute along the Shatt al-Arab waterway. This aid enabled the Iraqi Kurds to maintain enough resistance to force the Baghdad government into reaching an agreement to implement Kurdish autonomy, although by 1974 armed conflict reopened due to a lack of trust between the two parties. Iraq's capacity to engage militarily in the Arab effort against Israel in the 1967 War was weakened while the Kurds assisted in facilitating the process of Iraqi Jews seeking to make their way to Israel through Iran. However, in 1975, once the border dispute with Iraq was settled, the Shah pulled the plug on assistance to Iraq's Kurds and greatly annoyed the Israelis in the process. Four years later, Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq, although he wielded much power in that country over the previous decade. In 1992, a year after Operation Desert Storm, which drove Iraqi forces from Kuwait and weakened Saddam Hussein's rule over Iraq, the Kurds were able to establish de facto autonomous existence in the northern part of Iraq. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Israelis were operating in the Kurdish region; besides providing military training, they were allegedly engaged in covert intelligence operations in Kurdish areas of Syria and Iran. By 2014, Israel was reportedly purchasing oil from the Kurdish Regional Government.

Israel's ties with the Kurds of Iraq, especially with the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) of the Barzani's–which has been led by Mullah Mustafa's son Masud since 1979–have been based in part on the old adage

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend" as well as on genuine sympathy among many Israelis for the Kurdish people and their cause.[2] The same factors may hold true for the Kurds of Syria given the current civil war in that country, which began in 2011 and allowed for Kurdish de facto autonomy the following year; there is a possibility, especially with the breakup of Syria, that Kurds there might establish similar connections with Israel that exist with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. As for the Kurds of Turkey, while Israel does not officially regard the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a terrorist organization–though Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently called it such–the PKK's activities during the Cold War and Israel's continued priority in maintaining manageable relations with Turkey have precluded a similar relationship. This article will examine the past, present and possible future connections between Israel and the Kurds, relations that are far more secretive, given the political sensitivity of those ties in the Middle East region, than what the Jewish state has with most countries.

Israel-Kurdish Relations throughout the Cold War

While the "peripheral alliance" came to fruition in the late 1950s, the concept's genesis can be attributed to Reuven Shiloah, the future first director of Mossad,[3] who in the early 1930s as a representative of the Jewish Agency (the governing body of the *Yishuv*, or Jewish community in Palestine), but posing as a school teacher and part-time journalist, traveled the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan assembling an extensive network of intelligence.[4] During the 1940s and 1950s, Kumaran Ali Badr Khan, a Kurdish leader from an important family in Syria's al-Jazira province, spied for Israel.[5] He traveled throughout Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan in June 1948 in the midst of the first Arab-Israel war to assess means of disrupting those Arab states' war efforts; Badr Khan suggested the organization of uprisings by discontented minorities, including the Kurds, but the Israelis

[2]See Michael B. Bishku, "The Kurdish Spring and the Changing Geopolitics of the Middle East" in *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*, Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter, Eds. (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2013), especially pp. 81-86.

[3]His tenure in Mossad was 1951-1952.

[4]Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman, *Every Spy a Prince: A Complete History of Israel's Intelligence Community* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1990), p. 21.

[5]Ian Black and Benny Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars: A History of Israel's Intelligence Services* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), p. 184.

did not have the resources to carry out such a plan.[6] Badr Khan continued to have contacts with the Israelis even into the 1960s, meeting secretly with Shimon Peres, then-Deputy Defense Minister, in 1964.[7] However, Kurdish nationalist manifestations in Syria were quiescent for the most part until the first decade of the twenty-first century as the Kurds in that country were either repressed or coopted.[8] For those in Iraq things were quite different.

Reportedly, Israel contacted Iraqi Kurds of the KDP somewhere in Europe just after the beginning of the Kurdish rebellion against the Baghdad government in the autumn of 1961, but their offer of support was rejected for fear of offending countries in the Arab World.[9] Perhaps as early as 1963, but more likely 1965, conditions were right for those connections to be renewed; veteran foreign correspondent and war journalist Jonathan Randal notes that during the earlier year there was a report in the Western press of "mysterious airdrops of weapons" to the KDP.[10] However, Ben-Gurion's official biographer Michael Bar-Zohar cites the memoirs of Meir Amit (the director of Mossad, 1963-1968): "At the end of 1965, our dream started to become a reality. The unbelievable happened. An official Israeli delegation settled in the camp of Mullah Mustafa Barzani."[11] Prior to that, Ismet Sheriff Vanly, a Syrian-born Kurd close to Barzani, had visited Israel in 1964 meeting with Yaakov Herzog (director general of the Foreign Ministry), Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Levi Eshkol; Vanly reportedly remarked following those meetings: "All the officials I met in Israel said Iraqi Kurdistan was heading for independence. I was sure that Israel was sympathetic toward the Kurds."[12] Cooperation was beneficial to both parties as Iraq had participated in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and continued

[6]David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 471.

[7]Black and Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars*, p. 184.

[8]Eva Savelsberg and Jordi Tejel, "The Syrian Kurds in Transition to Somewhere,'" *The Kurdish Spring*, Ahmed and Gunter, Eds., pp. 192-202.

[9]Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), pp. 73 and 80, note 34.

[10]Jonathan C. Randal, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness? My Encounters with Kurdistan* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1997), p. 190. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *The Israeli Connection: Who Israel Arms and Why* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), p. 19 claims that in 1963 "Large-scale aid, in the form of arms, ammunition and Israeli military advisors" arrived in Iraqi Kurdistan from Iran; he cites Samuel Segev, *The Iranian Triangle* (Tel Aviv: Maariv, 1981) [Hebrew], but the English version of that book translated by Haim Watzman (New York: The Free Press, 1988) makes no mention.

[11]Quoted in Michael Bar-Zohar and Nissim Mishal, *Mossad: The Greatest Missions of Israel's Secret Service* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2012), p. 160.

[12]Quoted in Randal, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?* p. 196.

to be antagonistic toward Israel, while the Kurds needed outside military assistance to pursue their stated goal of autonomy; the Kurds also believed that Israel could influence the United States to provide support for their cause, even though the latter was reluctant to become involved believing that it would damage relations with the Arab states.[13] Indeed, Barzani had told *New York Times* reporter Dana Adams Schmidt in 1964: "Let the Americans give us aid, openly or secretly, so that we can become truly autonomous and we will become your loyal partners in the Middle East."[14] The Shah of Iran was willing to help Barzani's KDP in Iraq in return for that Kurdish leader agreeing to restrain political activities of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) that were hostile to Tehran; most in the latter group naturally felt betrayed as they had provided assistance for the rebellion in Iraq.[15] Iraqi-born Yaakov Nimrodi, Israel's military attaché at their embassy in Tehran, was responsible for the arms transfers to the KDP.[16] However, Iran did want limitations placed on the Iraqi Kurds; according to one knowledgeable observer, the following described the Shah's attitude: "I want the fire of the rebellion to flicker, but I do not want a flame."[17] He also insisted on having an Iranian liaison officer present during the transfer of arms and–due to fears of adverse domestic public opinion or pressure from conservative countries in the Arab world–on the utmost secrecy on any Iranian involvement.[18]

Indeed, inside Iraqi Kurdistan Mossad agents, who were always relatively few in number, according to Randal, dressed in traditional Kurdish clothing, though oddly they did not include Israelis born in the region, and generally spoke Arabic. As a result, while the Iraqi government was quite aware of their presence, visiting foreign journalists never saw a trace of them or, in the rare case that happened, did not perceive of the situation.[19] Palestinian historian Saleh Abd al-Jawad, contends that there were thousands of agents who also posed as agricultural experts and personnel

[13]Ibid, pp. 195-196.

[14]Quoted in Dana Adams Schmidt, "The Kurdish Insurgency," *Strategic Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Summer 1974), p. 54 as cited in Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds in Iraq: Tragedy and Hope* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 26.

[15]McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 253.

[16]Randal, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?* p. 190. Nimrodi was later a key figure in the Iran-Contra Scandal.

[17]Quote from an "anonymous Israeli official" in Bengio, *Kurds of Iraq*, p. 75.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Randal, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?* p. 191. There were probably about 30,000-40,000 Jews who left Iraqi Kurdistan during the early 1950s.

from humanitarian organizations.[20] In August 1965, the Israelis provided a training course code named *Marvad* (carpet) for *Peshmerga* (the military forces of Iraqi Kurdistan) officers that lasted three months. The following summer, Prime Minister Eshkol and Mossad Director Amit sent Aryeh "Lova" Eliav, Deputy Minister for Industrialization and Development, to Iraqi Kurdistan, bringing with him three doctors and three nurses, all male, who established a field hospital.[21] The Israelis also assisted in setting up *Parastin*, an intelligence organization led by Mustafa Barzani's son, Masud, who was trained in both Kurdistan and Israel, in order to gather information on the Iraqi government and armed forces as well as to intimidate opponents.[22] Mossad's head of operations in Iraqi Kurdistan was Eliezer (Geizi) Tzafrir, who had a long career, later serving in Iran and Lebanon. The United States was informed of the cooperative efforts of Israel, Iran and the Iraqi Kurds and according to Trita Parsi "agreed to lend limited clandestine support."[23]

Military training operations of the Kurds which took place in Iraqi Kurdistan as well as Iran and Israel concentrated on the usage of mortars, recoilless rifles, anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, and infantry tactics. Israeli instructors were impressed with the fighting skills and sharpshooting of the Kurds, who were also provided with rifles.[24] Israeli advisors accompanied the Kurds as they proved themselves on the battlefield; in May 1966, they routed an entire Iraqi brigade at Mount Handrin, as a result of which, according to military analyst Edgar O'Ballance, it took the Iraq's army two years to recover adequate strength to mount another offensive against the Kurds.[25] Israeli advisors were also reportedly present in March 1969 when the Kurds launched a mortar attack on Kirkuk's oil fields, accounting for a large percentage of Iraq's production.[26] In return, the Kurds assisted in the defection of an Iraqi pilot and his MiG 21 in

[20]Sargis Mamikonian, "Israel and the Kurds (1949-1990)," *Iran and the Caucasus*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2005), p. 393 citing Saleh Abdel Jawwad, "Israel: The Ultimate Winner," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no date given.

[21]Black and Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars*, p. 184; and Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981), p. 142.

[22]Randal, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?* pp. 190-191; and Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, p. 133.

[23]Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the U.S.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 53.

[24]Randal, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?* p. 192.

[25]Edgar O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle, 1920-1994* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), p. 84.

[26]Black and Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars*, pp. 327-328.

August 1966 by helping his family escape to Iran and kept the Iraqis busy militarily and unable to provide any significant help to the Arab effort in the Six-Day War of 1967.[27] The Kurds also assisted 3,000 Iraqi Jews to escape, who eventually flew from Tehran to Tel Aviv.[28] It should be noted that some 80-85% of Iraq's Jewish population, almost 108.000 people, had left earlier during Operation Ezra and Nehemiah from May 1950-August 1951, while others did so over the next few years; thus by 1957 there was a population of only about 5,000 remaining from a community extending back in time to ancient Babylon.[29]

Despite the benefits to Israel of the alliance, not all Israeli officials felt comfortable with the situation, even though they were sympathetic for the ambitions of the Kurds. Ezra Danin, who served as Director of the Middle East Department in the Foreign Ministry under Prime Minister Gold Meir (1969-1974), revealed two decades later in writings published posthumously his reservations: "It was clear to me that the assistance we gave the Kurdish fighters in Iraq could not but be interpreted as exploiting the Kurdish tragedy for our own ends, even though the assistance itself was a noble contribution...."[30] Nevertheless, the actions of governments (and nationalist movements) are most often motivated by *realpolitik*. Mullah Mustafa Barzani secretly visited Israel in 1968 and 1973 as did his sons, while sending other Kurdish emissaries to meet at times with Iraqi government officials; also, there were other leaders in the Kurdish movement who either accepted reluctantly or were critical of the Israeli connection. In the latter category was Jalal Talbani, who in 1975 established in Damascus the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and whom Mullah Mustafa had distrusted since 1964 when the younger Talabani had made a high profile visit to Cairo to meet with Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser, which Barzani viewed as undermining his stature.[31] As for connections with the Shah's Iran, Barzani reportedly told Yevgeny Primakov, a Soviet journalist and KGB operative, in January 1973: "I knocked on one door, asking for

[27]Ibid, pp. 207-209; and Quil Lawrence, *Invisible Nation: How the Kurds' Quest for Statehood is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East* (Walker & Company, 2009), p. 20.

[28]Raviv and Melman, *Every Spy a Prince*, p. 82. This operation was apparently "supervised" by Masud Barzani. (Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq*, p. 80, note 39).

[29]See Michael B. Bishku, "The Other Side of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Great Britain and the Issue of Iraqi Jewry Prior to 'Operation Ezra and Nehemiah,'" *Studies in Zionism*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring 1991), pp. 29-41.

[30]Quoted in Black and Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars*, p. 185.

[31]McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 315. Talabani also visited Algeria. (Lawrence, *Invisible Nation*, p. 20).

bread and was turned away [a reference to Baghdad]. What am I supposed to do, starve to death? So I knocked on another door. Who's to blame? Me or the one who turned me away?"[32]

In May 1972, a month after the signing of a Treaty of Friendship between the Soviet Union and Iraq, U.S. President Richard Nixon and then-National Security Advisor, but soon-to-be Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, according to the Pike Report–named for the head of the special committee on intelligence, Congressman Otis G. Pike of New York, investigating the clandestine activities of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)–decided to provide consistent support to the Kurds as "an instrument to dissuade Iraq from any international adventurism."[33] The U.S. gave a total of $16 million in aid including arms purchased from the Israelis while attempting to dissuade the KDP from suspicions that the Iranians might abandon them, even though both the CIA and State Department felt that such would eventually be the case.[34] Arms transferred included Soviet and Chinese rifles, automatic weapons and anti-aircraft guns captured by the Israelis from the Arabs during the 1967 war.[35] The U.S. also built a high-powered radio station for Iraqi Kurdistan based in Mawat.[36] In October 1972, the very reputable *Washington Post* columnist Jack Anderson reported that the Israelis brought Barzani a monthly subsidy of $50,000 in cash; for obvious reasons, Barzani denied that he ever received these payments in an interview with Edmund Ghareeb four years later.[37] Yet in 1980, when the Shah was in exile, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin made public his country's assistance of the arms, money and advisors to the KDP, five years after the now deposed Iranian leader had abandoned the Iraqi Kurds in the Algiers Accord.[38] Immediately following that agreement of March 1975, Barzani sent Kissinger a frantic message reminding the secretary of state of U.S. promises of support despite Iran's action, for which he never received a reply.[39] As Iraqi troops

[32]Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*. Translated by Paul Gould (New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. 336.

[33]Quoted in Ismet Sheriff Vanly, "Kurdistan in Iraq" in *A People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, Gerard Chaliand, Ed. (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1993), pp. 169-170.

[34]Ibid; and Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, pp. 53-54.

[35]Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, p. 140.

[36]Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq*, pp. 77 and 81, note 58.

[37]Ibid, p. 143.

[38]Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Politics in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), p. 162.

[39]Vanly, "Kurdistan in Iraq," p. 173.

proceeded to the Kurdish mountain headquarters, Peshmerga fighters prepared to flee to Iran before the border was closed while Mossad's head of operations Tsafrir hurriedly burned papers.[40]

Israel's Relations with the Kurdish Regional Government and Other Kurdish Groups

During the late 1970s and up through the 1980s, Israel was preoccupied with developments in civil war in Lebanon, while during the latter part of the 1980s Kurdistan was at the frontlines in the Iran-Iraq War. Given the secretiveness of Israel's involvement with the Iraqi Kurds it is quite possible that Mossad maintained its communications with the KDP. The renegade former Mossad officer Victor Ostrovosky claims in an article published in 1999 that "limited cooperation" continued after 1975 and "increased somewhat" during the Iran-Iraq war, but provides no evidence to support that assertion.[41] Also, he does not discuss the issue in his two supposed tell-all books *By Way of Deception*[42] and *The Other Side of Deception*.[43] However, there are reports elsewhere that Mossad and the CIA conducted operations from Iraqi Kurdistan into Kurdish areas just across the border in Iran right after the Islamic Revolution in that country.[44] Israeli operations in Iraqi Kurdistan probably resumed by late 2003 or mid-2004, according to the very reputable investigative journalist Seymour Hersh.[45] More than a decade earlier, in 1991, following the liberation of Kuwait in the Gulf War, events in Iraq drew international attention as the Kurds, encouraged by U.S. President George H.W. Bush, engaged in an uprising against the government of Saddam Hussein forcing large numbers of Kurdish civilians to flee to Iraq's border with Turkey (as well as Iran). Israel (and other countries) provided aid to the refugees, while Iraqi-born Jews in Israel staged a large demonstration outside the residence of Prime Minister

[40]Gil Shefler, "In Iraq's Kurdish Zone, Israelis and Long-Hidden Jews See Hopes for Revived Ties," *Tablet*, November 8, 2013. http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/151888/israel-kurdistan-love-story. (Accessed September 14, 2017).

[41]Victor Ostrofsky, "Capture of Kurdish rebel Leader Ocalan Recalls Mossad Collaboration with Both Turkey, Kurds," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, April/May 1999. https://www.washingtonreport.me/1999-april-may/capture-of-kurdish-rebel-leader-ocalan-recalls-mossad-collaboration-with-both-turkey-kurds.html. (Accessed September 14, 2017).

[42]With Claire Hoy (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

[43](New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994).

[44]Mamikonian, "Israel and the Kurds," p. 396 citing a Soviet source published in 1990.

[45]Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), pp. 353 and 357.

Yitzhak Shamir who was meeting with U.S. Secretary of State James Baker calling for the American government to provide military assistance against reprisals from the Iraqi Army.[46] The U.S. (and its allies) subsequently organized a "no-fly" zone in the northern part of Iraq that provided protection to the Kurds and lasted until the 2003 invasion of Iraq, even though the two Kurdish factions, Masud Barzani's KDP and Jalal Talabani's PUK fought a bloody civil war in which 3,000-5,000 people died, from 1994-1997.[47] Nevertheless, just as the Israelis had to defer to the sensitivities of the Shah's Iran during the 1960s and 1970s, in the post-Cold War world they had to do the same with regard to Turkey, with whom they shared common strategic interests in the region, even signing a military cooperation and training agreement in 1996.[48] Indeed, supporters of PKK in Germany believed that Israel provided information to Turkey resulting in the capture of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya in February 1999, whose organization had been engaged in armed conflict with Turkey since 1984 and previously had had the support of Syria. At the time, due to the storming of the Israeli consulate in Berlin by violent protesters resulting in the Israeli security detail shooting of three of them, Efraim Halevy, then head of Mossad, had to make a very rare public statement denying Israel's involvement.[49]

Writing in 2005, Armenian scholar Sargis Mamikonian asserted that Israel's "primary information source" on Kurdistan was Kurdish Jews, who retain "a strong nostalgic feeling for their old country."[50] Ofra Bengio points out that that "affinity and mutual trust" is reflected in literature and arts in Israel.[51] However, since that time, many Israelis (including civilians not born there or of Kurdish parentage) have visited Iraqi Kurdistan, though

[46]Sergey Minasian, "The Israeli-Kurdish Relations," *21st Century* (Yerevan, Armenia), No. 1 (2007), p. 25. http://www.noravank.am/upload/pdf/256_en.pdf. (Accessed September 14, 2017).

[47]Aldo Liga, "Israel and the Iraqi Kurds in a Transforming Middle East," *Instituto Affari Internazionali*, Working Paper 16/34, December 2016, p. 5. http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiwp1634.pdf. (Accessed September 15, 2017).

[48]See Michael B. Bishku, "How Has Turkey Viewed Israel?" *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January 2006), especially pp. 189-190.

[49]Jacques Neriah, "Kurdistan: The Next Flashpoint between Turkey, Iraq, and the Syrian Revolt," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, August 5, 2012, p. 23. http://jcpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Kurdistan-Neriah.pdf. (Accessed September 15, 2017).

[50]Mamikonian, "Israel and the Kurds," p. 389.

[51]Ofra Bengio, "Surprising Ties between Israel and the Kurds," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Summer 2014), p. 3. http://www.meforum.org/meq/pdfs/3838.pdf. (Accessed September 15, 2017).

their first acquaintance with the area following the establishment of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in 1992 was of a military nature. Israeli operatives began training Kurdish commandos in the manner of their country's *Mistaravim* (counter-terrorism units of the army and police) to deal with especially Shi'a militias, who were considered the greatest threat at the time, and in engaging covertly in intelligence gathering in Kurdish areas of Iran and Syria. U.S President George W. Bush's Administration strongly favored the former activity, which was somewhat disturbing to the Turks as they believed that "the very same commandos trained for Iraq could infiltrate and attack in Turkey."[52] They also felt at the time, that Israel's actions might encourage the "division" of Iraq. A Turkish diplomat explained his country's position in the following manner: "We tell our Israeli and Kurdish friends that Turkey's good will lies in keeping Iraq together. We will not support alternative solutions."[53] Scott Ritter, a United Nations weapons inspector in Iraq during the 1990s, noted that Ankara "would turn a blind eye toward Israel's support of the Kurds in Iraq and Iran in exchange for Israel's assistance in clamping down on the Kurdish rebellion in Turkey [a reference to military and intelligence cooperation]."[54] Turkey would gradually reconcile itself to the autonomy exercised by the KRG and engage in productive political and economic relations eventually establishing a consulate in Erbil in 2010, but it would continue to fear the development of an independent Kurdish state. Therefore, Israel, while sympathetic to Kurdish aspirations, refrained from formally endorsing immediate independence for the territory governed by the KRG–though in the last few years individual politicians have voiced support for that ultimate objective–and has not made any discernible approaches to the PKK[55] even though Turkey's ties with Hamas, regarded as a terrorist organization by many Western countries, have been an irritant at times in bilateral relations.

[52]Hersh, *Chain of Command*, p. 358.

[53]Quoted in Ibid, p. 359.

[54]Scott Ritter, *Target Iran: The Truth about the White House's Plans for Regime Change* (New York: Nation Books, 2006) p. 21.

[55]Ofra Bengio, "Israel and the Kurds: Love by Proxy," *The American Interest*, March 18, 2016. https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/03/18/israel-and-the-kurds-love-by-proxy/. (Accessed September 16, 2017). Bengio notes that following the *Mavi Marmara* crisis in 2010, "Israel and the PKK put out feelers about a possible rapprochement; however, nothing concrete has materialized." Israel and Turkey resumed full diplomatic relations in 2016, a little over three months after the publication of this article.

Unlike the case of the clandestine efforts to aid the Iraqi Kurds in the 1960s and 1970s, the return of the Israeli security presence in the early 2000s and Israeli-Kurdish relations in general were not as secretive. In 2004, the Israeli media reported on meetings between Masud Barzani (who would become president of the KRG the following year and still holds that position), Jalal Talbani (who would become president of Iraq the following year and serve in that office until 2014) and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.[56] In 2005, the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Aharonot* reported that business firms supplied the Kurds with "tons of Israeli-manufactured equipment," including motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles, devices for upgrading Kalashnikov rifles, flak jackets, uniforms and helmets as well as snifter dogs. Reportedly, Motorola Israel and Magel Security Systems was involved in training the Kurds employing former Israeli soldiers.[57] The following year, when the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) TV program *Newsnight* filmed Israelis training Kurdish militiamen in shooting techniques, Kurdish officials refused to comment, while the Israeli government denied any involvement, since it appeared that private companies were engaged in these activities, and told the BBC that it was investigating what would be a breach of Israeli law, i.e. operating without government permission.[58]

While the Kurds did not want to acknowledge military ties with Israel, political and economic relations were something else, though political ties have never been formalized. In 2005, Barzani asserted that "establishing relations between the Kurds and Israel is not a crime since many Arab countries have ties with the Jewish state."[59] Three years later, Talabani shook hands with then-Israeli Minister of Defense Ehud Barak at a meeting of the Socialist International in Athens.[60] When criticized severely for this action by Iraqi parliamentarians, Talabani explained that he acted in his capacity as head of the PUK, not as president of Iraq.[61] Barzani could

[56]Minasian, "The Israeli-Kurdish Relations," p. 26.

[57]"Israel ex-commandos training Kurds in north Iraq: report," *Institut Kurde de Paris*, December 1, 2005. http://www.institutkurde.org/info/depeches/israel-ex-commandos-training-kurds-in-north-Iraq-report-27.html. (Accessed September 16, 2017).

[58]Magdi Abdelhadi, "Israelis `train Kurdish forces,'" *BBC News*, September 20, 2006. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/5364982.stm. (Accessed September 16, 2017).

[59]Quoted in Neriah, "Kurdistan: The Next Flashpoint," p. 23.

[60]James Kirchick, "Another Israel: Kurds and Jews share similar history and a common enemy," *Tablet*, October 18, 2010. http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/47651/another-israel. (Accessed September 16, 2017).

[61]Bengio, "Surprising Ties between Israel and the Kurds," p. 8.

understand that distinction as he had stated the following in a television interview in 2007: "If an Israeli embassy were opened in Baghdad, we would no doubt open an Israeli consulate in Erbil."[62] Indeed, under Article 110 of the Iraqi Constitution, approved by referendum in 2005, the federal government had "exclusive" authority in "Formulating foreign policy and diplomatic representation."[63] Nevertheless, Falah Mustafa Bakir, head of the KRG's Department of Foreign Relations since 2006 when that office was established to "conduct relations with the international community...in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Iraq,"[64] notes: "We have no problems with Israel. They have not harmed us. We can't be hating them just because Arabs hate them."[65] Yet the KRG is solely an autonomous region in a federal state and must follow Iraqi law. Therefore, its representation abroad is limited to countries formally recognized by Iraq. As of mid-September 2017, the KRG had a mission to the European Union and 13 other representatives abroad, located mostly in European countries (including Russia) as well as the U.S., Australia and Iran.[66] The Islamic Republic was the only country with two consulates in Iraqi Kurdistan, one each in Erbil and Sulaimaniya. Those of the other almost two dozen countries (mostly European, including Russia, and Middle Eastern, including Palestine, as well as the U.S., China, India, Japan and South Korea) were exclusively in Erbil, where Sweden and Canada had "embassy offices."[67] While the Iraqi Kurds have extensive formal ties with Western states, due to the geopolitics of the region they have attempted, at least until the announcement of the independence referendum in 2017–please see below–to be careful to take into consideration the political sensitivities of their Arab and Muslim neighbors.

[62]Quoted in Kirchick, "Another Israel."

[63]An English language text of the 2005 Constitution of Iraq may be found at the website of the World Intellectual Property Organization: http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/details.jsp?id=10027.

[64]Kurdistan Regional Government (Henceforth KRG), Department of Foreign Relations (Henceforth DFR), "About DFR." http://www.dfr.gov.krd/p/p.aspx?p=25&l=12&s=010000&r=332. (Accessed September 16, 2017).

[65]Quoted in Kirchick, "Another Israel."

[66]KRG, DFR, "KRG offices abroad." http://www.dfr.gov.krd/p/p.aspx?p=40&l=12&s=020100&r=364. (Accessed September 16, 2017).

[67]Ibid, "Current Foreign Representations in the Kurdish Region." http://www.dfr.gov.krd/p/p.aspx?p=37&l=12&s=020100&r=363. Also, "Japan Opens Consulate in Kurdistan Region," *Iraq Business News*, January 11, 2017. http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2017/01/11/japan-opens-consulate-in-the-kurdistan-region/. (Both accessed on September 16, 2017).

Despite the aforementioned Constitution, there are ongoing disputes between Baghdad and Erbil over some key issues: the role of the KRG's army (*Peshmerga*), the final status of Kirkuk and other territories controlled by the Kurds, and ownership of oil resources and revenues.[68] In June 2014, the same month that the Islamic State (IS) occupied Mosul, which it would hold for a little over three years, there were reports that oil flowing from the Iraqi Kurdistan had arrived in the port of Ashkelon in Israel. In 2013, the KRG had begun the yearlong construction of an alternate route for the Kirkuk to Ceyhan pipeline that traveled solely through its territory.[69] The pipeline was more efficient than transporting the oil in Turkish trucks to the port of Ceyhan.[70] Other countries such as Italy, Turkey and Greece were also purchasing oil from the Kurds, accounting for 17, 9 and 8 percent, respectively, of their imports, while Israel's share was reported to amount to 77% of its average annual demand. Israel also imports oil from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Russia, but those countries have formal diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. Furthermore, Baghdad claims that the Erbil is exceeding its allotment, while Erbil contends that the central government has not sent them adequate funding for administrative services. Some industry sources believe that Israel may have received the oil at a discounted price, something which the KRG denies, while others have suggested it may be a means to funnel financial support to the Kurds. An unnamed senior Kurdish government official stated "We do not care where the oil goes once we have delivered it to the traders. Our priority is getting the cash to fund our Peshmerga forces against Daesh [meaning IS] and to pay for civil servant salaries."[71] Indeed, oil shipments may change hands multiple times before reaching a final destination. On another note,

[68]Michael M. Gunter, "Arab-Kurdish Relations and the Future of Iraq," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 9 (October 2011), pp. 1625-1626.

[69]KRG, Cabinet, "KRG statement on first oil sales through pipeline export," May 23, 2014. http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?l=12&a=51589. (Accessed September 18, 2017). The statement explained that revenues from sales would be deposited in its account in Turkey's *Halkbank* and "and will be treated as part of the KRG's budgetary entitlement under Iraq's revenue sharing and distribution as defined under the 2005 Constitution of Iraq."

[70]Julia Payne, "Israel accepts first delivery of disputed Kurdish pipeline oil," *Reuters*, June 20, 2014. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-iraq/israel-accepts-first-delivery-of-disputed-kurdish-pipeline-oil-idUSKBN0EV0X620140620. (Accessed September 18, 2017). Smaller amounts of that oil made it to Israel.

[71]Figures on oil imports and the quote from the KRG official are from David Sheppard, John Reed and Anjli Ravel, "Israel turns to Kurds for three-quarters of its oil supplies," *Financial Times*, August 23, 2015. https://www.ft.com/content/150f00cc-472c-11e5-af2f-4d6e0e5eda22. (Accessed September 18, 2017).

the distance between Erbil and Mosul is a mere 50 miles, so therefore for a few years, the KRG's capital was very close to the front in the fight against IS. While the main contractor of Erbil's international airport opened in 2010 was the Makyol Group from Turkey, it is rumored that the *Asayish* (Kurdish internal security service), which provides security for the airport, is Israeli-trained.[72]

It has also been reported in the Israeli press that besides providing security training and purchasing oil, companies from Israel have invested in energy, construction and communications projects.[73] More importantly than these economic interests, an independent Kurdish state would change immensely the dynamics of Middle East geopolitics in Israel's favor. Therefore, it is no surprise that in June 2014, then-Israel's Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman told U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry that "Iraq is breaking up before our own eyes and it would appear that the creation of an independent Kurdish state is a foregone conclusion."[74] A week later, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated the following in a speech to Israel's Institute for National Security Studies that the Kurds are a "fighting people who have proven political commitment and political moderation, and they are worthy of their own political independence."[75] In reaction to Netanyahu's speech, then-Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki referred to the possibility of an independent Kurdistan in a pejorative manner as a "second Israel."[76] Although, he was probably contemplating such earlier, on February 1, 2016 Masud Barzani stated on his website "that the time has come and situation is now suitable for the Kurdish people to make a

[72]Erbil International Airport, "A winning design." http://www.erbilairport.com/ABUT01/F_ABUT01_02_02.aspx; Makyol, "Projects." http://www.makyol.com.tr/en/projects; and Peter Schwartzstein and Campbell MacDiarmid, "How to run an international airport with jihadists on the doorstep," *Quartz*, May 30, 2016. https://qz.com/692720/how-to-run-an-international-airport-with-jihadists-on-the-doorstep/. (All accessed September 18, 2017).

[73]"Strategic dimensions of the relationship between Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan," *Middle East Monitor*, September 1, 2015 translating an article from *Aljazeera.net*, August 26, 2015, which cited an article from *Maariv*, November 19, 2014. https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20150901-strategic-dimensions-of-the-relationship-between-israel-and-iraqi-kurdistan/. (Accessed September 18, 2017).

[74]Quoted in Batsheva Sobelman, "Netanyahu expresses support for Kurdish independence," *Los Angeles Times*, June 29, 2014. http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-netanyahu-israel-iraq-kurdistan-20140629-story.html. (Accessed September 18, 2017).

[75]Quoted in Ibid.

[76]Edy Cohen, "Kurdistan: From Referendum to the Road to Independence," *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 507, June 24, 2017. https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/kurdistan-referendum/. (Accessed September 18, 2017).

decision through a referendum on their fate."[77] At the time, the Peshmerga was performing a very important part in the campaign to liberate Mosul, Iraq's second largest city. However, it was not until June 2017, in the final weeks of the battle for Mosul and following a meeting of representatives from all the political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, that the referendum was scheduled for September 25.[78] Another consideration is that Barzani wants to begin the process of independence–which could take years of negotiations with the Baghdad government–before the KRG's elections for the next president scheduled for November 1.[79] Even though a majority in the Iraqi parliament rejected the referendum two weeks before the scheduled vote, a few days later 65 of the 111 members in the Kurdistan regional parliament voted to proceed nevertheless.[80] Iraq's Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi warned that "imposing a fait accompli will not work. We will not allow the partition of Iraq."[81] On September 19, Iraq's Supreme Court declared the referendum unconstitutional.[82] In the midst of a trip to Latin America, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated in a press conference that Israel "supports the legitimate efforts of the Kurdish people to achieve their own state."[83] Thus, the Jewish state was placing itself at odds with the U.S., which had attempted in August unsuccessfully to postpone to referendum believing along with its Western allies that reaction to an affirmative vote might take the form of military action on the part of the Iraqi Kurdistan's

[77]Quoted in Liga, "Israel and the Iraqi Kurds in a Transforming Middle East," p. 4.

[78]"Kurdistan Region to hold independence referendum on Sept. 25," *Rudaw*, June 7, 2017. http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/070620171. (Accessed September 18, 2017).

[79]Michael Knights, "What is at stake in Iraqi Kurdish vote for independence? *BBC News*, September 18, 2017. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41239673. (Accessed September 18, 2017).

[80]"Iraq parliament rejects Kurdish independence referendum," *Al-Jazeera*, September 12, 2017. http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/iraq-parliament-rejects-kurdish-independence-referendum-170912132652290.html; and "Kurdish MPs say yes to independence referendum," September 15, 2017. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41279682. (Both accessed September 18, 2017).

[81]Quoted in Knights, "What is at stake in Kurdish vote for independence?"

[82]"Iraq top court rules to suspend Kurdish referendum," *Al-Jazeera*, September 18, 2017. http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/iraq-top-court-rules-suspend-kurdish-referendum-170918102729593.html. (Accessed September 18, 2017).

[83]David Wainer, "Israel Endorses Kurdish Independence in Lone Show of Support," *Bloomberg*, September 13, 2017. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-09-13/israel-endorses-kurdish-independence-in-lone-show-of-support. (Accessed September 18, 2017).

neighbors or cause conflict within Iraq and definitely detract from the continuing fight against IS.[84]

Turkey, which regards Kurdish independence as a threat to its security and would provide encouragement to Kurds within its borders, conducted military drills mostly with tanks near its border with Iraqi Kurdistan, close to Syria, from September 18-26, while Iran, which has similar fears, warned of "unspecified consequences," if the vote took place.[85] On September 24, Iran halted flights to Iraqi Kurdistan's two international airports (Erbil and Sulaimaniya) at the request of Iraq's government, while the border was closed the following day.[86] Far more seriously, in the midst of the aforementioned military drills, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan suggested that Turkey would halt the flow of oil through the pipeline: "We have the valve. The moment we shut the valve, that's the end of it."[87] Turkey began the process of closing the border. (Meanwhile, Syria, which is in no position to do anything, dismissed the referendum as "a joke.")[88] There was also a protest by the Turkish ultranationalist *Vatan* (Homeland) Party on September 15, which forced the temporary evacuation of Israel's embassy in Ankara; the Secretary General of that party Utku Reyhan called the Kurdish referendum a "declaration of war by U.S. imperialism and Israeli Zionism against countries in the region" and an attempt to create a "second Israel."[89] Turkish Islamists are also suspicious of Israel's intentions in Iraqi

[84]"U.S. asks Iraq Kurds to postpone referendum–Kurdistan Presidency," *Reuters*, August 12, 2017. https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds/corrected-u-s-asks-iraq-kurds-to-postpone-referendum-kurdistan-presidency-idUSL5N1KY053. (Accessed September 18, 2017).

[85]Tuvan Gumrukeu and Maher Chmaytelli, "Turkish tanks drill on Iraqi border week before Kurdish vote," *Reuters*, September 18, 2017. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-turkey/turkish-tanks-drill-on-iraqi-border-week-before-kurdish-vote-idUSKCN1BT0WA. (Accessed September 18, 2017).

[86]Nabih Bulos and Tracy Wilkinson, "Iraqi Kurds vote on creating an independent Kurdistan–but big obstacles stand in the way," *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 2017. http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-kurdistan-election-20170925-story.html. (Accessed September 25, 2017).

[87]Quoted in "Turkish leader says his country could halt Iraqi Kurdistan's oil exports over independence vote, which he calls a `matter of survival,'" *Times of Israel*, September 25, 2017. https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-threatens-military-action-over-iraqi-kurdish-referendum/. (Accessed on September 25, 2017).

[88]Quoted in Damascus labels nonbinding referendum, opposed by virtually every country in the region, as `unacceptable,'" *Times of Israel*, September 25, 2017. https://www.timesofisrael.com/syria-government-rejects-iraqi-kurdish-independence-vote/. (Accessed September 25, 2017).

[89]Sue Surkes, "Turkish nationalists protest creation of `second Israel' in Kurdistan," *Times of Israel*, September 18, 2017. https://www.timesofisrael.com/iraq-vice-president-warns-against-second-israel-in-kurdistan/. (Accessed September 18, 2017).

Kurdistan (as are Islamists and others in the Muslim world). Pro-government newspapers claimed that some 200,000 Jewish Kurds were going to be repatriated to Iraqi Kurdistan after September 25; in the words of *Yeni Şafak*, Masud Barzani "who received support only from Israel during the referendum process, plans to strengthen his hand...with the help of Kurds of Jewish origin who have prominent positions in Israel."[90] While people in the Muslim world are willing to believe such claims due to Israel's close connections with the Iraqi Kurds, especially Barzani's KDP–and given situations like Israeli flags flying side-by-side with Kurdish ones at independence rallies–Israel's relations with other groups of Kurds have been either generally antagonistic as in the case of Turkey's PKK or somewhat limited regarding the Kurds in Iran and Syria.

In September 2010, just months after the *Mavi Marmara* crisis, which created a deep freeze in Turkish-Israeli relations, one of the founders and acting leader of the PKK, Murat Karayılan did an interview with Israel's Channel 2 during which he stated, referring to the Jewish state,

> Once we were friends. [However, in the last couple of decades,] you have been considered here [at a PKK base in northern Iraq] to be among those who systematically assist in our oppression and eradication.... The most advanced [military] technology that Turkey uses against...[us] and Kurdish civilians comes from Israel.

Karayılan continued,

> It is a real mystery to me. Because you more than any other people in the world, I would have expected...[to] identify with us. After all, you who have experienced the Holocaust, massacres, expulsions and persecution, now see our people, the Kurdish people, experiencing the same fate. Everyone in this area–Syrians, Turks and Iranians–wants to and is trying to destroy us.

He noted then-Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's improved relations with Syria and Hezbollah as well as his hugging of then-Iranian President Mahmud Ahmedinejad and his praise of Hamas and thus concluded, "Are you sure this is your friend?"[91] Karayılan failed to mention that in the 1980s the PKK trained alongside the PLO in Lebanon's then-Syrian-controlled Beqaa Valley and took part in battles in the Lebanese Civil War against the

[90]Quoted in Barın Kayaoğlu, "200,000 Jewish Kurds headed for Iraqi Kurdistan, howls Turkish press," *Al-Monitor*, September 13, 2017. https://al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/09/jewish-israeli-kurds-bound-for-krg-after-referendum.html. (Accessed September 18, 2017).

[91]Excerpts of that interview are quoted in "Turkey the `Common Enemy,' PKK Tells Israel," *Asbarez.com*, September 22, 2010. http://asbarez.com/85625/turkey-the-common-enemy-pkk-tells-israel/; and Kerim Balcı, "Turkey, Israel and the PKK," *Al-Arabiya News*, September 23, 2010. https://english.alarabiya.net/views/2010/09/23/120120.html. (Both accessed September 20, 2017).

Israelis.[92] (It should be noted that Karayılan's approach has been contested by Cemil Bayık, another founding member of the PKK and part of that organization's executive committee.)[93] However, the subsequent souring of relations between Turkey and Syria, over Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's conduct in the civil war, a ceasefire and unsuccessful Turkey-PKK negotiations between 2012 and 2015 and the possibility of Israel selling natural gas to Turkey, precluded any move toward rapprochement between Israel and the PKK and instead assisted in the restoration of full diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel in June 2016. In the interim, Selahattin Demirtaş, Kurdish leader of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) of Turkey stated:

> Erdoğan keeps using [Israel]...to increase votes. [He is]...screaming and shouting [and] making statements...leading people to discrimination; to be enemies of Jews may bring you votes but you lose human values and it hurts them.... Israel and Turkey should be friends. Animosity between states and people are not forever. Israeli and Palestinian states and their people should learn to live as free states.[94]

Nevertheless, like other politicians in Turkey, he also publicly condemned Israeli actions in the 2014 Israel-Gaza war.

While Israel has been cautious to avoid any noticeable contact with the PKK due to Turkish sensitivities, such has not been the case with Syrian and Iranian Kurdish groups where they appear to be amenable to interactions or future possibilities, even with organizations either associated or believed to be linked with the PKK. Indeed, Israel, possibly with cooperation from the U.S., reportedly conducted a proxy war inside Iran with the assistance of Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) for almost a decade until 2013, when the connection was severed possibly as a result of pressure from the Obama Administration, which wanted to pursue a nuclear deal with Iran.[95] As for the Syrian Kurds, with which Ofra Bengio has had contact, she believes that they are willing to have relations with Israel; in her words in March 2016, "This is like the Kurds of Iraq. Once they feel stronger, they can think about taking relations into the open." Furthermore, she dismisses Turkey's accusation that the PYD (Democratic Union Party) is a "terrorist" organization and points out that: "Today, the PYD is working

[92]Benjamin Kweskin, "Israel's ambivalent relations with the Turkish Kurds," *Vocal Europe*, March 3, 2017. http://www.vocaleurope.eu/israels-ambivalent-relations-with-turkeys-kurds/. (Accessed September 20, 2017).

[93]Ibid.

[94]Quoted in Ibid.

[95]Entessar, *Kurdish Politics in the Middle East*, p. 250; and Bengio, "Israel and the Kurds: Love by Proxy."

to stabilize what they have achieved since 2012. It's not logical to believe they would open up another front with Turkey."[96] Only time will tell if Israel is willing to develop such a relationship that is most likely to do damage to ties with Turkey, unless possibly if Syria breaks up into different political entities on a permanent basis. Indeed, in the aftermath of the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, in which some 72% of eligible voters went to the polls and over 92% of them favored independence, Erdoğan suggested that he was pondering a reassessment of relations with Israel.[97] The Turkish President followed up that comment with the accusation that Mossad played a role in its outcome;[98] Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu immediately replied: "I understand why those who support Hamas want to see the Mossad in every uncomfortable place" and that Israel's only part in the process was a "deep natural longstanding sympathy...for the Kurdish people and their yearnings."[99]

Conclusion

Besides developing pragmatic ties, given the geopolitics of the Middle Eastern region, Israel (or before that the Jewish Agency) and the Kurds developed an affinity for each other having faced numerous adversities over the last century–or longer, especially in Europe, in the case of Jews–and sharing the experience often times of severe reactions from neighbors opposing their self-determination and/or sovereignty. Both have sought the support of outside powers in order to overcome these adversities and to counterbalance military threats or political pressures; and at times dealings with those outside powers have been very disappointing. (Interestingly, the Palestinians most certainly have similar feelings, especially since the establishment of the state of Israel and, indeed, Kurdish connections with Israel do not preclude an understanding of the plight of the Palestinians.)

[96]Dov Lieber, "After declaring autonomy, Syrian Kurds 'open to ties with Israel,'" *Times of Israel*, March 18, 2016. http://www.timesofisrael.com/after-declaring-autonomy-will-israel-embrace-syrias-kurds/. (Accessed September 20, 2017).

[97]Alexander Fulbright, "Turkey's Erdoğan threatens ties with Israel over support for Kurds," *Times of Israel*, September 26, 2017. https://www.timesofisrael.com/threatening-ties-erdogan-tells-israel-to-review-support-for-kurdish-vote/. (Accessed September 27, 2017).

[98]Fulya Özerkan, "Erdoğan claims Mossad played a role in Iraqi Kurdistan independence vote," *Times of Israel*, September 30, 2017. https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-claims-mossad-played-a-role-in-iraqi-kurdistans-independence-vote/. (Accessed October 1, 2017).

[99]Quoted in Stuart Winer, "Sniping at Erdoğan, Netanyahu says Israel not involved in Kurdish vote," *Times of Israel*, October 1, 2017. https://www.timesofisrael.com/sniping-at-erdogan-netanyahu-says-israel-not-involved-in-kurdish-vote/. (Accessed October 1, 2017).

One cannot help but notice parallels in the attitudes of the major powers at the time of the establishment of the state of Israel and the Kurdish referendum of September 25, respectively. Even after the partition plan for Palestine was approved in the United Nations in November 1947, the U.S. and other countries, fearing conflict in the region, wanted Jewish leaders to postpone the announcement of the establishment of their new state scheduled for the time of Britain's termination of its mandate over Palestine. Approval of independence in the Kurdish referendum does not mean immediate enactment. However, unlike the case of Palestine, where the Jewish Agency did not rule over any territory, the Kurds have operated efficiently in their own autonomous region for many years. The Arab world opposed the partition of Palestine as it opposes the partition of Iraq today. Yet both territories were post-First World War creations of the British and designed to suit their strategic interests. Having said that, the establishment of an independent Kurdish state does change the geopolitics of the region and it is for that reason Israel is pleased–at the same time, negotiations with the Palestinians concerning their own state are moribund–while most other countries are wary of what developments might bring for the future. Will it embolden Kurdish populations in neighboring states to sever their territories and seek independence as well? It appears that Iraqi Kurdistan's neighbors believe so; however, the most likely case is Syria, which just like Iraq is fragmented and a country still in a technical state of war with Israel. Nevertheless, since the referendum vote Turkey and Iran have been quite willing to coordinate with Baghdad in implementing measures designed to isolate the state by cutting off air and land links and by exerting economic pressure and by threatening possible military action, to force the Kurds to nullify the results.[100] Turkey is strong enough militarily to preclude the establishment of a Kurdish state within its borders, while the Iranian Kurds are fragmented, but both countries also are unwilling to offer any serious measures of local autonomy. If history is any indication, it must be noted that neither the establishment of Azerbaijan nor of Macedonia have posed any real security threats for Iran nor Greece, respectively, which have within their borders regions with the same name and populations of the same ethnicity. Also, embargoed states have survived, though Iraqi Kurdistan being landlocked does present problems in it receiving Israeli assistance.

[100]"Foreign airlines suspend Kurdistan flights after Baghdad ban," *The New Arab* (*Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, London), September 27, 2017. https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/amp/news/2017/9/27/foreign-airlines-suspend-kurdistan-flights-after-baghdad-ban. (Accessed September 27, 2017).

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Uneasy Neighbors: Iran and the Kurdish Regional Government

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine the evolving relationship between Iran and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The main thesis of the article is that despite some initial reservations about the emergence of a self-governing autonomous government in Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran has now accepted the permanency of the KRG. As a result, both Iran and the KRG have focused on commonalities of interests between them and have sought to develop a functioning framework for expansion of their socioeconomic and political relations. Notwithstanding the desire of both sides to develop amicable and long-lasting relations between themselves, a variety of regional and domestic factors have served as impediments to the blossoming of Tehran-Erbil relations.

The evolution of the KRG in the aftermath of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing 1990-91 Gulf War presented new political and security challenges for both Iran and Turkey. Iran's policies towards the nascent Kurdish self-governing entity were driven by the following five considerations:

- Opposition to Iraq's disintegration and concern about the ultimate transformation of the KRG from a semi-autonomous entity to a full-fledged independent government. Consequently, Iran did not take steps towards recognizing the KRG.
- Keeping an open channel of communication with the KRG and providing support, albeit minimally and cautiously, to efforts by the KRG to prevent the full restoration of the Bath'i control over northern Iraq.

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